

Reclaiming your life in spite of chronic pain

By [Mayo Clinic staff](#)

When you get injured or have surgery, you expect to hurt for a while, but you know that in time, you'll heal and the pain will leave. If you have a medical condition — from arthritis to heart disease to shingles — you recognize discomfort as a symptom and trust that treatment will help. While you wait for your body to mend, pain medication provides relief.

Chronic pain is different. Sometimes, it's an aftereffect of an injury that appears to have healed. Sometimes, it's a lingering symptom of a past illness. And in some cases, chronic pain develops out of the blue, with no link to trauma or disease. However you try to explain it, chronic pain is something of a mystery. Tests and examinations may uncover nothing abnormal, but your body's distress is real.

Over time, physical pain takes an emotional toll, making your body hurt even more. Anxiety magnifies unpleasant sensations, and sleep problems leave you feeling weak and helpless.

Persistence, poor response to treatment, unknown cause, sleep disruption and emotional fallout — these are the hallmarks of chronic pain. And the longer you've had it, the less likely it will be to disappear, whatever you do. But chronic pain doesn't have to rule your life. Here's how to take control.

Find the right care

If you've been going from doctor to doctor, now's the time to settle on one and build a good relationship. The right doctor could be a family physician or a specialist with expertise in your underlying condition — for instance, a rheumatologist if you're dealing with arthritis or a physical medicine expert (physiatrist) if you have back pain.

Or you may want to work with a pain management specialist. If you have a primary doctor, he or she may be able to refer you to one. Otherwise, major hospitals and multispecialty group practices are likely to have pain management specialists on staff. If a hospital has a pain clinic, you can find a pain specialist there. If not, check with the hospital departments that may have a pain management component — physical medicine, anesthesiology and psychiatry.

Pain Centers and Clinics: Turn to the Specialists

When selecting a pain specialist, look for someone who:

- Is knowledgeable about chronic pain
- Wants to help
- Listens well
- Makes you feel at ease
- Encourages you to ask questions
- Seems honest and trustworthy
- Allows you to disagree
- Is willing to talk with your family or friends
- Has a positive attitude toward life and your condition

Even if you're working with a pain specialist, you need a primary doctor to manage your overall health. Keep both doctors informed about the details of your condition, and make sure they both have access to all your records. It's particularly important for every doctor you consult to know what pain medication you're on, who's prescribing it and what, if any, additional drugs you take for other reasons. Sharing this information reduces the risk that you'll accidentally overdose on pain medication or experience a dangerous drug interaction. Once your pain is under control and you're on a stable regimen of medications, your primary care doctor can provide ongoing prescriptions.

Take back your life

When you have chronic pain, it can dominate your thinking, sometimes in ways that aren't obvious. To become informed about your condition, for instance, you may spend a lot of time monitoring pain-related publications and Internet newsgroups. Of course it's important to understand what's happening to your body and perhaps connect with people who have similar problems. But constantly reading and talking about pain keeps you focused on what's wrong when you could be finding ways to build on everything that's still right.

Facing the challenge of chronic pain

How can you shift your focus? Start by setting simple, measurable, reasonable and attainable goals. Think about times when your pain has gotten out of control, and figure out how to keep it from overwhelming you again.

For instance, if you often have to take extra doses of pain medication at night because you've forgotten to take a scheduled dose during the day, ask your doctor about changing your dosing schedule or otherwise simplifying your regimen. Then set a goal of using your medication exactly as prescribed for two weeks, with the understanding that you'll call your doctor if problems arise.

Once you've gone two weeks on a stable regimen, make it your next goal to stick to the schedule for two more weeks, then for four. In time, these simple steps will add up to a big change. You'll have established one of the most important parts of an overall pain management plan, perhaps for the first time since you developed a pain condition. Now you can move on to new goals.

Another example: Your back pain is as bad as ever, and your doctor says it will stay that way unless you do a simple set of exercises at least once a day. You're embarrassed to admit it, but you've never been able to complete the exercises without getting short of breath and making your stiff knee act up.

In this complicated situation, you might burden yourself with an unrealistic goal — get on the stick and do the exercises, for instance. But here's an attainable goal: Come clean with your doctor. Exercises for back pain should not leave you breathless. If they do, you need your doctor's help to find out why and take care of the problem. Another goal might be to ask for a referral to a physical therapist or exercise trainer who'll show you the best techniques for strengthening your back muscles without straining anything else.

In both examples, the process is the same. You identify an obstacle that prevents you from taking a step toward feeling better. Then you find a way around the obstacle and go on to the next challenge.

Chronic Pain: Exercise can bring relief

It's hard to want to exercise when you're already in pain. In fact, it's probably the very last thing you want to do. But regular exercise is a versatile weapon that can be used to combat your pain in a variety of ways.

Exercise prompts your body to release special chemicals, called endorphins, that actually block pain signals from reaching your brain. These chemicals also help alleviate anxiety and depression, conditions that can make your pain more difficult to control.

"Endorphins are the body's natural pain-relieving chemicals that in many cases are more powerful than morphine," says Edward Laskowski, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist and co-director of the Sports Medicine Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

Specific types of exercises can be used to strengthen the muscles around sore joints. For example, building up your leg muscles with strength training can provide a natural brace for an arthritic knee.

"The more you can enhance the structural support of the joint with stronger muscles, the more force and load you can take off bones and cartilage," says Dr. Laskowski. "This can contribute to pain reduction."

Regular exercise also improves your sleep and gives you more energy to cope with your pain. It can help you lose weight, which will reduce the stress on your joints.

Don't be discouraged, however, if you don't lose weight. Exercise can increase weight by adding new muscle. Researchers have found that an overweight person who is fit is better off than a thin person who doesn't exercise.

"It used to be thought that if you were in pain, then you'd better rest," says Dr. Laskowski. "But the exact opposite is found to be true in our research. When people rest they became deconditioned. That deconditioning can lead to further problems that may perpetuate the pain."

When you are inactive, all your muscles, including your heart, lose strength and work less efficiently. Inactivity raises your risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. These problems increase your chances of having a heart attack or stroke.

What to include in your program

Any exercise program should be tailored to your condition — this increases your health benefits and decreases the chance of injury. Your doctor can recommend specific activities for you. In general, most exercise programs include flexibility, strengthening and aerobic exercises.

Flexibility. Flexibility exercises include simple range-of-motion and stretching movements. Such exercises help reduce joint stiffness and allow you to move more comfortably. They also prevent your muscles from shortening and tightening.

Strengthening. Strength training increases your lean muscle mass and makes you stronger. Muscles burn more calories than fat burns. This helps you maintain a healthy weight, and every pound counts when it comes to sore joints.

Aerobic. Aerobic exercises challenge your heart, lungs and muscles, increasing your heart rate, blood pressure and need for oxygen. These exercises help your body work more efficiently and reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Aerobic activity also increases your stamina so that you don't become as easily fatigued during daily activities.

Staying on Track

Even if you recognize all the benefits of exercise, you may have trouble staying motivated. Many people find that their energy levels and moods improve after they become more physically fit. Here are some other suggestions for staying on track.

Set goals. Make your goals specific, measurable and realistic. It's easy to get frustrated and give up on goals that are too ambitious.

Start slowly. The most common mistake is to start at too high an intensity. The resulting pain and stiffness are discouraging. Instead, lay out a moderate schedule of regular exercise with gradual increases — and stick to that schedule.

Add variety. Build your exercise program around activities you enjoy, but vary what you do to prevent boredom. Alternate your activities. You may even consider joining a health club to broaden your access to different varieties of physical activity.

Be flexible. It's OK to adapt your exercises to accommodate your schedule. If you develop a cold or the flu, take off a day or two from your exercise program. Fatigue can increase pain.

Track your progress. Each time you exercise, record what you do, how long you do it, and how you feel during and after it. Recording your efforts helps you work toward your goals and reminds you that you're making progress.

Be social. Exercise with a friend or make new friends who like to exercise by joining a group and taking a class.

Play it Safe

Muscle soreness after exercise is normal. It means you've stimulated your muscles to grow stronger. You can ease this type of pain with stretches, ice and continued moderate exercise. However, if your chronic pain worsens during exercise, that's an entirely different situation.

"It means you're doing something wrong and might be injuring yourself," says David Martin, M.D., a consultant in the Division of Pain Medicine at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "Check your form, reduce the intensity or take a break."

You have your whole life to enjoy the benefits of exercise, so don't rush into a strenuous workout regimen before your body is ready. "Remember to start low and progress slow. It is not advised that people push through severe pain," says Dr. Laskowski. "Consistency is more important than intensity."